

Using Story Structure For Lesson Design in Teaching About Sexual Assault

Ryan G. Erbe and Katherine D. Kearns

Abstract

The present pilot study examines the use of story structure for lesson design to promote student engagement in a lesson focusing on sexual assault prevention. The effect of the story-based lesson on undergraduates' knowledge and perceptions of sexual assault was studied using a quasi-experimental mixed methods design. Results of the study indicated that using story structure for designing and implementing the lesson increased students' concern about sexual assault and influenced attitudes about prevention away from law enforcement and punishment towards personal responsibility with respect to consent and alcohol use. Recommendations for college health education are discussed along with recommendations for future research.

Keywords: Sex Education, College Student Health, Sexual Assault Prevention

Background

Sexual assault continues to be a significant concern for college administrators across the country. Approximately 23% of college women report experiencing some form of unwanted sexual contact (Cantor et al., 2015). Furthermore, one in five college freshman will become victims of sexual assault during their first year (Carey, Durney, Shepardson, & Carey, 2015). In light of these findings, many campuses have attempted various strategies aimed at reducing the appalling number of incidences, including defining or changing the meaning of consent in their campus policies and codes of conduct.

Many parties are involved in the task of eradicating sexual assault on college campuses such as administrators, law enforcement, and counseling staff. In particular health educators are in a key position to help undergraduates acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to prevent and reduce the incidence of sexual assault. Students need to know what is considered a sexual assault, what consent is, and the factors that can lead to sexual assault. In addition, students need to possess communication and decision-making skills to avoid these potentially harmful situations and to help their peers from being sexually assaulted. A recent review found that conclusive evidence regarding what works for sexual assault prevention remains scarce (Newlands & O'Donohue, 2016). A second review found that although effectiveness varies depending on a variety of factors, classroom based programs can be effective (Vladutiu, Martin, & Macy, 2010). However, the way these effective classroom-based strategies are structured remains unknown. Traditional classroom-based prevention programs emphasize didactic delivery of information regarding the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses, exposing rape mythology, discussing sex role socialization practices, and identifying risks behaviors related to sexual assault and empathy for rape survivors (Breitenbecher, 2000). One study demonstrated the effectiveness of using a scenario to change attitudes about sexual assault; however this study used a case-study as part of a lesson and did not emphasize the structure of the lesson itself (Holcomb, Sarvela, Sondag, & Holcomb, 1993). Little emphasis has been placed on evaluating pedagogical strategies aimed at changing college students' attitudes. Health educators are constantly seeking novel and innovative ways to capture students' attention in order to help them emotionally connect with the information being presented so they can personalize the material and acquire the needed knowledge and skills.

Using stories and the structure of narratives to design lessons has been recommended as a means to promote student understanding of material, the ability to remember key points, and engagement in the learning experience (Egan, 1985, 1986; Willingham, 2004, 2009). Willingham (2009) suggests using the characteristics that are inherent in all stories to design lessons. These traits include the 4 C's of stories: Characters (the main individuals involved), complications (small problems that arise), conflict (the main struggle), and causality (each event being causally related to the next event). Studies examining the difference between people reading narrative and expository texts suggest that people remember and comprehend stories better (Graesser, Singer, & Trabasso, 1994; Keenan, Baillet, & Brown, 1984) and are more engaged with narrative rather than expository text (Britton, Graesser, Glynn, Hamilton, & Penland, 1983). Given these findings, a story-based learning environment and teaching strategy seems promising for teaching important topics such as sexual assault.

* Ryan G. Erbe, PhD, Associate Instructor, School of Public Health, Indiana University-Bloomington, 1025 East Seventh Street, Bloomington, IN 47405-7109; Phone: (607) 339-1897; Email: rerbe@indiana.edu; Fax: (812) 855-3936, ESG Chapter Membership: Nu Chapter, Indiana University

Katherine D. Kearns, PhD, Lead Instructional Consultant, Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning, Indiana University-Bloomington, Wells Library E250, Bloomington, IN 47405; Phone: (812) 855-6869; Email: kkearns@indiana.edu

* Corresponding Author

Acknowledgements: Dr. Catherine Sherwood-Laughlin for reviewing and contributing thoughtful comments.

Funding: No Funding was received to support this research.

Purpose

The purpose of this pilot study was to examine the use of story structure to promote student engagement in a lesson focusing on sexual assault prevention. Specifically, a lesson was designed focusing on sexual assault using story structure as a means to enhance students' concern about sexual assault on college campuses.

Method

Sample

This pilot study used a purposive sample of college undergraduates enrolled in a 300 level Men's Health class taken during the summer of 2015 at a Mid-Western public research university. The class consisted of 22 students, 16 males, mostly seniors, and the average age was 21. This study was reviewed and approved by the University Institutional Review Board. Students received an information study sheet, were read an explanation of the study, and were given the option to participate in the study. All students who agreed to participate in the lesson were expected to complete the pre- and post-lesson assessments as course assignments, however, only students who gave consent were included in this study. Students were not given any compensation for their time nor were their grades in this course affected should they choose not to participate in this study.

Learning Experience Description

The one-class 60-minute session lesson occurred midway through the course and began with students viewing a video entitled *'It's On Us'* ([youtube.com/watch?v=vk8HhXj20b8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vk8HhXj20b8)), which includes statements by constituents about personal responsibility for all when it comes to sexual assault prevention. This video was followed up by describing statistics highlighting the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses (Cantor et al., 2015) and a brief discussion of the definition of sexual assault as defined by the university.

Students were then divided into groups of four prior to the central task of reading a story about sexual assault. Each student in their group read a different segment of a story involving sexual assault and was asked to react to what they thought may have occurred prior to or following their story segment. The segments of the story were created based on Willingham's (2009) 4 C elements. Each segment included detailed descriptions of the characters and complications that arose, with each segment causally connected to each other and revolving around the 'Conflict' of sexual assault. The groups were instructed to have one group member read their story segment aloud for the rest of the group to hear. The students were then instructed to personally reflect on their own thoughts regarding the story and whether it involved sexual assault or not. Following personal reflection, each group briefly discussed their individual thoughts with each other as a means to prompt further thought and peer-based learning. Due to the sensitivity of the topic and the mixed gender class, it was acknowledged that all students may not feel comfortable participating in the group discussion. The lesson concluded with a whole class discussion focused on why the story was an

example of sexual assault, the definition of consent according to the university, and effective prevention strategies.

Research Design

The effect of the pilot study using a story-based lesson on undergraduates' knowledge and perceptions of sexual assault was completed using a quasi-experimental mixed methods design (Thyer, 2012). The assessment instrument consisted of three items that were given as part of both a pre-lesson test and a post-lesson follow-up. The three items included a quantitative measure, a word elicitation, and an open-ended question as a means to gather a range of data in order to answer the research question. A quantitative measure of students' concern regarding sexual assault included one item asking participants 'On a scale of 1-5 (one being not concerned, five being very concerned), how concerned are you about sexual assault?' A word association task asked participants to identify ten words they associate with 'sexual assault'. Finally, the instrument included an open-ended question about effective prevention strategies for reducing the number of incidences involving sexual assault. The lesson assessment was developed by the researchers, an interdisciplinary team included a PhD student with a MS and a member of the Center of Innovative Teaching and Learning with a PhD in ecology.

Data Collection

Participants were given the pre-test two days prior to the lesson to be completed on their own time. Each student was given a random code number to de-identify responses to coders. On the day of the lesson, participants turned in their completed pre-test in an envelope and a signed form to the instructor indicating completion of the pre-test. After the lesson, students were given four days to complete a post-test on their own time. Post-tests were submitted in the same manner as the pre-test. Of the 22 students enrolled in the course, 17 completed both the pre and post-tests ($N_{\text{males}} = 11$).

Data Analysis

Pre- and post-test responses were entered into an excel spreadsheet for ease of analysis. Only coded numbers were used, removing all references to student names, to connect pre- and post responses. Word associations were counted and ordered from the spreadsheet. The quantitative analysis utilized a paired t-test with SAS 9.4. The open-ended responses were coded for themes by the lead researcher and reviewed by the co-author. Analyzed data did not include responses from the in-class discussion, only what was gathered by the study instrument.

Results

Quantitative Analysis

One quantitative measure included in both the pre-test and post-test measuring the level of concern regarding sexual assault, was analyzed using a paired t-test. Results from this test indicated a statistically significant increase from pre to post-lesson in the participants' level of concern with respect to

very important when dealing with sexual behaviors. You can't give consent if you've been drinking' and 'I feel that consent is extremely important and that any sexual experience you encounter must be treated seriously.'

A qualitative analysis of most common words participants associated with sexual assault on the pre-lesson instrument included rape (9.4%), forced (6.4%), crime (4.1%), and violence (2.9%) (Figure 1). The most common post-lesson responses were rape (8.5%), consent (6.8%), alcohol (3.4%), and violence (2.8%) (Figure 2). Common words that were consistent in pre- and post-lesson responses included rape and violence, while common words that were different included forced and crime in the pre-lesson responses versus consent and alcohol in the post-lesson responses. Larger words in the 'word cloud' correspond to those that were more frequently mentioned.

Figure 2. Post-Lesson Word Association



Figure 2. Post-Lesson Word Association



Discussion

In this study, we examined the effectiveness of using story structure for a lesson design focusing on sexual assault prevention. Specifically, we were interested to determine if a lesson using story structure would increase students' concerns about sexual assault on college campuses as measured by a quantitative item. Results from the t-test indicate that students' concerns about sexual assault did increase after experiencing the sexual assault prevention lesson. This finding may be due to stories being more engaging than other types of information delivery forms (Willingham, 2009) thereby increasing a student's connection to the material. Anecdotal evidence of student engagement included observations that all students were on task throughout the lesson and that students began to discuss the story before being prompted to do so by the instructor.

Also of interest were students' responses to the word association and open-ended question. Pre-lesson assessment results from these two segments indicated that students viewed sexual assault as a crime and that prevention needing to focus on law enforcement and punishment. After experiencing the lesson these students' ideas appeared to shift towards the importance of consent and limiting the use of alcohol, which has been shown to contribute to a large number of sexual assaults (Antonia, 2002). The lesson focused on a story that students may have personally related to or at least could personalize. Due to the relatability of the story, students may have shifted their thoughts from sexual assault as a crime in need of more legal enforcement to something they can personally take responsibility for by understanding consent and limiting contributing factors such as alcohol.

When considering both main and secondary results together, an encouraging finding emerges. As students' concern about sexual assault increased, their attitudes about prevention appeared to shift away from external and punitive strategies, to more personally responsible methods such as using consent and reducing alcohol consumption. Taken together, students appeared to take ownership over the concerning issue of sexual assault in terms of prevention after experiencing a personally relevant story depicting a harmful situation.

Study Limitations

Because the study design did not include a comparison group, two threats to internal validity for this study include history and maturation. History, significant events occurring outside the study such as sexual assault prevention media campaign, might have impacted participant responses. In addition, due to developmental changes that take place in college students over time, maturation may have influenced student responses. However, these influences are not likely to be major factors in this study due to the short timeframe covered in this study (Thyer, 2012). The study instrument has not undergone reliability and validity analyses at the present time and therefore should in future research. Finally, due to the small sample size, and non-representative demographics from this class of students, findings from this study are not generalizable to the larger college student population. Although limitations exist, the study included both quantitative and qualitative measures, which strengthened conclusions

drawn from this research.

Translation to Health Education Practice

The present study examined the effects of a novel health education teaching strategy aimed at enhancing student engagement as a means to increase concern regarding a current problem facing college students. Using story structure for lesson design to increase engagement can be an effective strategy used in health education. When designing sexual assault prevention curricula, health educators should consider using narrative approaches such as the one mentioned in the current study. Specifically, collaborating with campus wellness services to determine current sexual assault trends on the local campus and then incorporating these into the four C's (complications, conflict, characters, and causality) when creating sexual assault prevention lessons may prove to be effective in increasing college students' concern about sexual assault.

This current method may be especially true for teaching college students about sensitive issues such as supporting family members with chronic diseases, managing mental illness, responding to a friend who has recently been diagnosed with a Sexually Transmitted Infection, dealing with drug addiction, helping a friend struggling with gender and identity issues, along with others. Structuring lessons using a narrative format with the four C's may help ease student tension around difficult subject matter, make the material more relevant, and provide unique opportunities for discussion about personal application of health-related skills and functional knowledge. Future research should investigate the use of story-based approaches focusing on other difficult content areas in health education including chronic diseases, gender and sexuality, drug abuse and addiction, and mental health issues. These studies should include comparison groups to limit internal threats to validity. Story form can be a useful format when designing and implementing health education lessons.

References

- Antonia, A. (2002). Alcohol-related sexual assault: A common problem among college students. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol, Supplement 14*, 118-128. doi:dx.doi.org/10.15288/jsas.2002.s14.118
- Breitenbecher, K. H. (2000). Sexual assault on college campuses: Is an ounce of prevention enough? *Applied & Preventive Psychology, 9*, 23-52.
- Britton, B. K., Graesser, A. C., Glynn, S. M., Hamilton, T., & Penland, M. (1983). Use of cognitive capacity in reading: Effects of some content features of text*. *Discourse Processes, 6*(1), 39-57. doi:10.1080/01638538309544553
- Cantor, D., Fisher, B., Chibnall, S., Townsend, R., Lee, H., Bruce, C., & Thomas, G. (2015). *Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Misconduct*. Rockville, MD: Westat.
- Carey, K. B., Durney, S. E., Shepardson, R. L., & Carey, M. P. (2015). Incapacitated and forcible rape of college women: Prevalence across the first year. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 56*, 678-680.
- Egan, K. (1985). Teaching as story-telling: A non-mechanistic approach to planning teaching. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 17*(4), 397-406.

- Egan, K. (1986). *Teaching as Storytelling: An Alternative Approach to Teaching and Curriculum in the Elementary School*. Ontario: The University of Chicago Press.
- Graesser, A. C., Singer, M., & Trabasso, T. (1994). Constructing inferences during narrative text comprehension. *Psychological Review*, 101(3), 371-395.
- Holcomb, D. R., Sarvela, P. D., Sondag, K. A., & Holcomb, L. C. H. (1993). An evaluation of a mixed-gender date rape prevention workshop. *Journal of American College Health*, 41(4), 159-164. doi:10.1080/07448481.1993.9936318
- Keenan, J. M., Baillet, S. D., & Brown, P. (1984). The effects of causal cohesion on comprehension and memory. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 23, 115-126.
- Newlands, R., & O'Donohue, W. (2016). A critical review of sexual violence prevention on college campuses. *Acta Psychopathologica*, 2(2:14), 1-13. doi:10.4172/2469-6676.100040
- Thyer, B. A. (2012). Pre-experimental research designs *Quasi-Experimental Research Designs* (pp. 29-75). New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc.
- Vladutiu, C. J., Martin, S. L., & Macy, R. J. (2010). College- or university-based sexual assault prevention programs: A review of program outcomes, characteristics, and recommendations. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 1-20. doi:10.1177/1524838010390708
- Willingham, D. T. (2004). The priveleged status of story. *American Educator*. Retrieved from <http://www.aft.org/periodical/american-educator/summer-2004/ask-cognitive-scientist>
- Willingham, D. T. (2009). *Why Don't Students Like School?* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
-